

From: Teaching Toolbox - Center For Faculty Innovation <TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU> **On Behalf Of** Center for Faculty Innovation
Sent: Thursday, January 11, 2024 10:15 AM
To: TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU
Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Starting the Semester with an Equity-Minded Approach

Starting the Semester with an Equity-Minded Approach
by Gilpatrick Hornsby

Welcome to the spring semester! I hope you were able to spend the last few weeks focusing on yourself, your wellness, and whatever gives your energy. One of my goals for this new year is to take a more “equity-minded” approach in teaching my course. This is something that I always try to incorporate, yet there is always room for learning and growth. Luckily, on November 14, 2023, the CFI hosted Flower Darby, Associate Director of the Teaching for Learning Center at the University of Missouri at Columbia, to discuss her co-authored book, *The Norton Guide to Equity-Minded Teaching* (2023).

In this book, Darby and her co-authors discuss ten strategies for taking an “equity-minded approach” to teaching. They define equity minded as “teaching practices that strive to realize equal outcomes among all students” (xvii). The first thing my mind drifts to when I read “ten strategies” is an overly prescriptive way of thinking about teaching that does not consider the unique context of my class. So, let me assuage your fears and say that this is not their goal. My mind then drifts to thinking about doing ten new things in my class, and I get overwhelmed/tired/anxious. Yet, in Darby’s CFI presentation, she suggested focusing on only one or two strategies to start with and then exploring the others as you have the capacity. If you missed that session, you can view a recording [here](#). Their book is also available online for free, so I encourage you to [download a copy](#).

My goal in this Toolbox is to highlight a few “equity-minded” strategies that might be helpful as you think about this semester. The book is divided into three sections that examine before the term, during the term, and after the term. Given the timing of this Toolbox, I chose to focus on strategies that come from the first section.

Relevance

No one likes feeling like their time is being wasted. Whether you are a faculty member sitting in a committee meeting or a student sitting in the class, you want to feel like the information you are receiving is relevant to you and your goals. The book defines relevance as “the extent to which students can see their goals, interests, or experiences reflected in their learning” (3). In other words, can students see themselves in the content and experiences they are being exposed to in our classes? This was echoed by Dr. Kristin Philips, an invited speaker from Virginia Tech, when she presented on September 25th, 2023, for the CFI, on the topic “Using Neuroscience to Understand Best Practices in Teaching.” During that talk, she described that we can build student motivation to learn by creating a space where students can perceive themselves. One of the activities I do at the beginning of the semester in my Hospitality classes is to ask students why they are taking the class and where they hope to go in their careers. I note their responses and then try to use examples throughout the course based on their desired career trajectories. After reading this book, I plan to focus not only on what my students’ career aspirations are, but also find ways to fold in their lived experiences into the course and the content being covered.

Transparency

As with relevance, a desire for transparency is something that most faculty can relate to. We are all aware of the negative impact when we perceive a lack of transparency. *The Norton Guide to Equity-Minded Teaching* defines transparency as “the extent to which information that is often implicit or unknown to students regarding an assessment is made explicit or transparent to them” (35). While I appreciate the focus on assessment, making the unknown “known” is a principle that can be applied to many different aspects of the classroom, such as

grading practices, attendance policies, or examples of excellent work. In Rachel Gable's book [The Hidden Curriculum](#) (2021), she discusses how students may be wary of acknowledging that they do not know something, as it can be perceived as a weakness. This is especially true for first-generation students who may not feel like they belong anyway. It is therefore incumbent on us as faculty to champion transparency to create more inclusive spaces. Refocusing specifically on assessment, though, I took away from this chapter that students excel in "transparent" environments where they understand the purpose of the assessment, have a clear understanding of how to complete the assessment, and know the metrics of success for the assessment. For instance, on one of my group project rubrics, excellence is defined as "the project is well thought out and creative." Now I am thinking I can be clearer about this metric and provide multiple examples.

Inclusive Course and Syllabus Design

Finally, the authors of *The Norton Guide to Equity-Minded Teaching* highlight four ways you can advance equity specifically through your syllabus. While all four are wonderful, the two that I would like to focus on here are promoting a counternarrative for students who may not think they will be successful in the course and humanizing yourself for your students. One of my favorite stories I would tell my culinary students when I was at another institution is that, when I was growing up, I was making ramen one time and I forgot to add the water. After the timer was done, I came in to see the microwave on fire and the door melted. My dad was so upset, all he could do was go into his room and shut the door. I then say, "And that person is now the person who is going to teach you how to cook!" I usually get a few laughs, but this story accomplishes two goals: One, it lets students know that we all start somewhere and that this beginning point does not dictate how far you can go, and, two, it lets them know that the "expert" in the room has made mistakes, learned from them, and kept going. I'm not sure what your ramen story is, but I do think we create inclusive spaces in our classrooms by sharing them. I will say sharing these types of stories can make us feel vulnerable, so you may want to find other ways to humanize yourself and produce a counter-narrative for your students.

I hope that this Toolbox has piqued your interest in the book. Even in the sections I mentioned, I could not cover it all. So please, download a copy and peruse for your own personal use!

About the author: Gilpatrick Hornsby is the Associate Vice Provost for Faculty Success and the Executive Director of the Center for Faculty Innovation. He is also an associate professor of Hospitality Management. He can be reached at hornsbqd@jmu.edu.

To offer feedback about this Toolbox or any others, please contact Emily Gravett (graveteo@jmu.edu). We always appreciate a conversation with context for feedback. For additional information about the CFI's Teaching Toolboxes, including PDFs of past emails, please visit [our webpage](#).

To unsubscribe from the TEACHING-TOOLBOX list, click the following link:
<http://listserv.jmu.edu/cgi-bin/wa?SUBED1=TEACHING-TOOLBOX&A=1>